

## **The Best of Both Worlds: Exploring Cross-Collaborative Community Engagement**

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### **Abstract**

Lauded as a rewarding pedagogical approach, community-engagement can be time-consuming, resource-intensive, and difficult for instructors to manage for effective student learning outcomes. Collaborative teaching can allow instructors working in the same classroom to draw from each others' expertise and share resources. In this essay, we propose a fruitful approach that brings the benefits of collaborative teaching to community-engagement. Two instructors collaborated to facilitate a community-engaged food justice blog, demonstrating the benefits of combining these modalities. In this essay, we review relevant literature on collaborative teaching and community-engagement, presenting cross-collaborative community engagement as an innovative model for collaboration between instructors in separate courses, allowing instructors to maintain autonomy while working together toward engaged learning.

**Keywords:** Collaborative teaching, community engagement, service learning, blogs.

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Higher education is shifting toward interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and community-based service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Kliegl & Weaver, 2014; Mahoney & Brown, 2013; Shibley, 2006). Courses that utilize community engagement strive to apply classroom knowledge to community needs, as well as advance socially relevant causes. Undergraduate courses emphasizing skills, topical content, and foundational disciplinary concepts are well-adapted to community engaged pedagogy. Yet instructors can feel underprepared, or overwhelmed, in planning and implementing community engagement in their courses. Collaborative teaching can be an enlightening experience that, by bringing two instructors into the *same* classroom to facilitate group learning, can expose teachers and students to multiple perspectives and different subject areas. In light of the tension and competition traditional collaboration can create among teachers (Bettencourt & Weldon, 2010; Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Plank, 2011), we submit that community engaged learning can be an effective strategy for maintaining strategic and controlled collaboration among instructors in *separate* courses.

This essay proposes *cross-collaborative community engagement* as an innovative pedagogical approach. We offer initial reflections on the successful implementation of this

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new approach that combines community engagement with collaborative teaching. Our experience demonstrates the utility of collaborative teaching in mitigating barriers in the facilitation of community-engaged projects, allowing instructors and students to experience the “best of both worlds”: a shared-yet-distinct learning environment while contributing to a joint service project.

## Review of Relevant Literature

Collaborative teaching and community engagement have been gaining traction in higher education for some time (Harris & Harvey, 2000; McCarthy, 1996; Witte, 2012). Often discussed as service learning, community engagement offers a way to make course content relevant to greater societal issues and provide students with a variety of learning experiences.

Successfully integrating community engagement into a course requires extensive planning and preparation to identify community needs and partners, as well as conceptualize the actual service responsibilities of students (Day & Hurrell, 2012; Heath, 2010; Jenkins & Sheehy, 2012). Throughout the term of the service project, students need supervision and monitoring from the instructor to ensure adequate reciprocity between course content and service tasks. The instructor must also maintain open communication with the community partner(s) for problem-solving and risk management (Heath, 2010). Finally, instructors must have effective forms of assessment, including reflective writing and discussions, for the accomplishment of course learning objectives (Day & Hurrell, 2012; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007). In short, integrating service-learning into a course can burden faculty with the time needed to plan, implement, and evaluating a community engagement project. Junior faculty, or instructors looking to integrate community engagement for the first time, may be particularly overwhelmed by the labor required for successful project facilitation, and may be dissuaded from including community engagement in their courses (Furco, 2001; Jenkins & Sheehy, 2012).

In light of the logistical challenges and possible barriers of community engagement, scholars acknowledge the usefulness of collaboration between project stakeholders (including community partners, students, and instructors) in planning service projects (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Day & Hurrell, 2012; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007). As Jenkins and Sheehy (2012) note, “service-learning should be carefully and thoroughly planned,” and sharing tasks like identifying community partners and needs, determining the resources needed and available, and establishing project goals can benefit from multiple entities and differing perspectives (Preparation section, para. 1). Indeed, the collaborative space-inasmuch as resources are shared and tasks are allocated among service project stakeholders- provided by planning teams appears to mitigate the stress, and perhaps barriers to entry, of implementing community engagement. Although Bringle and Hatcher (2000) briefly note that community engagement is “compatible” with a collaborative environment (p. 71), little attention has been paid to utilizing collaborative teaching within the context of community-engagement. What we are calling *cross-collaborative community engagement*, an innovative approach to collaborative teaching, provides

promising potential for instructors seeking to integrate community-engagement into separate courses.

Collaborative teaching, also referred to as co-teaching or team teaching, typically consists of two or more instructors sharing the responsibility for teaching students in the same course (Bettencourt & Weldon, 2010; Mahoney & Brown, 2013; Shibley, 2006; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006). Instructors working in collaboration dually contribute not only to the internal classroom experience, but also to course planning/design and evaluation/assessment tasks.

Collaborative teaching can effectively enhance student and instructor learning. For students, diversity of perspectives, variety in teaching styles, and different levels of expertise between instructors can enrich a collaborative classroom experience and lead to improved student learning outcomes through greater student motivation, attention, and retention (Bettencourt & Weldon, 2010; Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Game & Metcalfe, 2009; Kliegl & Weaver, 2014). Teachers can also gain from exposure to alternative course materials, experimenting with new pedagogical practices, as well as make insightful connections between different content areas or disciplines (Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Mahoney & Brown, 2013).

In spite of these benefits, avoiding or alleviating challenges of collaborative teaching has remained a consistent theme in the literature since the early 1990s (Austin & Baldwin, 1991; Bettencourt & Weldon, 2010; Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Harris & Harvey, 2000; Mahoney & Brown, 2013; Plank, 2011). Early research into faculty collaboration gives advice to “carefully manage” the instructor-instructor relationship (Austin & Baldwin, 1991). Others continue to warn that collaboration can be a “messy...rough-and-tumble enterprise” (Plank, 2011). Various factors can discourage collaborative teaching including, time management, productivity concerns, and limited compensation (Mahoney & Brown, 2013; Plank, 2011). Indeed, cautiousness pervades this literature as authors note the forethought required before instructors leap into a collaborative venture.

While collaborative teaching can enhance collegial connections and provide relief from instructor isolation, issues related to negotiating the power dimensions of a collaborative environment tend to dominate discussions of challenges with this modality (Bettencourt & Weldon, 2010; Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Shibley, 2006). As Plank (2011) explains, collaborative teaching “moves beyond the familiar and practicable” to new territory “where they [have] to master new material, negotiate with others, and trust their colleague” (p. 2). Instructors must negotiate their roles, degree of authority, time allotted to their content, and assessment styles (Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Jones & Harris, 2012). Sharing a classroom- often regarded as a private learning space- can lead instructors to feel vulnerable to the other’s scrutiny, creating competitiveness and/or loss of confidence in one’s teaching ability (Shibley, 2006). Thus, as Day and Hurrell (2012) notes, collaboration can indeed be a “daunting” undertaking (p. 6).

We suggest that *cross-collaborative community engagement* can alleviate some of the logistical stress related to service-learning as well as eliminate some of this modality’s

common pitfalls. As instructors of two separate courses, we collaboratively planned and executed a community-engaged project that culminated in the creation of a public blog on food justice. In what follows, we offer initial reflections on this experience, through the planning, implementation, and assessment of a *cross-collaborative community engaged* project.

## Introducing Cross-Collaborative Community Engagement

This approach emerged as a way for us to develop a term-length community engagement project, and utilize collaboration while maintaining mutually autonomous courses. In early 2012, each of this essay's authors sought ways to enliven journalism and social justice courses offered in our university's general education program. These courses each emphasize communication skills through broadcast media production and persuasive writing, respectively. Although these courses have different individual learning objectives<sup>2</sup>, both thrive on students integrating their personal interest and experience outside the classroom into class activities and projects.

Together, we conceptualized a cross-collaborative community-engaged project centered around an identified social issue relevant to our community; the project would include participation in campus activities throughout the semester, and conclude with a capstone event for all students and community partners involved. Executing a semester-long service project in partnership with community organizations posed daunting tasks for either instructor individually. Collaboration across our two classes allowed us to lean on one another's strengths and to share resources, while maintaining relative autonomy and addressing course-specific content and skills development.

We followed the stages for implementing service learning in higher education courses as delineated by Jenkins and Sheehy (2012): preparation, implementation, assessment/reflection, and demonstration. We participated in planning sessions, implemented our cross-collaborative community engagement project over the course of a semester, and engaged in reflective assessment at the project's conclusion. In what follows, we describe each stage of the cross-collaboration process, and conclude with best practices for utilizing this unique approach.

### ***Planning Phase: Becoming a Team***

Rytivaara and Kershner (2012) indicate that the origins of co-teaching experiences are often serendipitous and unexpected. In our case, informal conversation was the primary channel by which we each expressed reservations about incorporating a community-engaged project into our social justice and journalism course, respectively. We considered the possibility of a dual project, to which students in each course contributed. This "teacher talk" (Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012) became the space in which we each learned

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<sup>2</sup> Maintaining individual course learning objectives differentiates the cross-collaborative approach from integrated course design. Rather than teaching several subject areas or connecting separate areas of study within a single course, cross-collaboration joins two distinct courses through a shared project that can support specific learning objectives in each without requiring further integration.

about our pedagogical values and intentions regarding instruction and learning objectives in each course, allowing us to develop shared ownership for what would become a service-learning project shared between two courses. We realized early on that a community-engaged project would enhance learning in journalism and social justice, while providing unique opportunity for our students to engage with one another also became apparent. Working together in the planning process lessened the stress of coordinating separate service projects and defining the expectations for what a cross-collaborative community engagement project could look like.

In line with Jenkins and Sheehy (2012), planning sessions were used to identify community partners and conceptualize the social need to be addressed through the project, determine our resource needs, set a project timeline, and plan the project-related learning objectives for each course. We established three goals to guide the project. First, we wanted students to develop course-specific skills while learning about a relevant social issue. Second, we wanted students to learn how to build a network of peers and community members. Finally, we aimed to develop a project that would facilitate creation of a portfolio of service products that students could draw upon to share project-related insights as well as to market themselves professionally. In planning our cross-collaborative community engaged project, Hunt provided connections to local food justice advocacy groups as well as readings and videos, which were integrated into each course; Krakow set up and maintained the blog that would house the students' project deliverables.

Community-engaged projects related to attention-grabbing issues, including the environment and hunger, tend to interest students and provide motivation during project implementation (Heath, 2010; Wilczenski, & Coomey, 2007). Food is a convenient pedagogical tool as it is familiar to- yet typically taken for granted by- students; food justice invites exploration of social issues like food quality and access, nutrition, and hunger (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). We arrived at this social issue by combining one another's interests with the community contacts provided by Hunt. The project was conceived as the facilitation and promotion of food justice awareness events on campus in partnership with food-based community organizations, including a local food bank and urban garden, and culminating with participation in a campus and community-wide fundraising banquet at the semester's end. As a central topic organizing our cross-collaborative community engagement project, food justice provided content flexibility that allowed us each to manageably weave it into our two separate courses.

Together, we developed complementary course syllabi and teaching materials, created a schedule of shared events, and designed complementary class assignments. To best facilitate a collaborative partnership between our classes, each was organized to mimic the activities of an applied setting- social justice students were organized as an advocacy group, and the journalism class was organized as a newsroom- inviting students to envision themselves as real participants in the promotion of food justice issues, while also providing opportunities for connections between both groups of students.

As a tool to connect students with each other and to share their project experiences, Krakow suggested the creation of a public blog to showcase all students' work related to the

food justice events. Recognizing the complementarity of audio/visual news stories with written op-eds/commentary, we created blogging assignments for each course, tailored to the journalism and advocacy skill sets of each group. The blog became a public forum for students to present their work and engage in discussions about events they attended and issues they were learning about. Again, we held regular instructor meetings to assess the blog's progress throughout the semester.

Cross-collaborative teaching thus became a strategy for mitigating the logistical difficulty of implementing separate community-engaged projects in our respective courses. Through what began as informal brainstorming, we expressed our pedagogical interest in and initial anxiety about introducing community engaged learning, and realized complementary skills and resources for which we could draw on one another, allowing us to plan and implement an innovative approach to community-engagement and collaborative teaching.

### ***Implementation Phase: Connecting the What to the How***

The community engagement project was introduced to students during the first week of each class. Each instructor visited the partner course<sup>3</sup> to introduce herself and provide contact information, reiterating the shared expectations for the project and each group's contributions. Throughout the semester, students participated through the shared food justice events and by posting on the collaborative blog. The blog was publicized on campus and to our community partners, increasing the visibility of the project to audiences beyond project stakeholders. Thus, the blog served as a central communication tool as students across our classes shared their experiences on the project and reflections on food justice.

Each month, members of both classes attended lunch-and-learn programs focused on food justice. Journalism students researched and produced various types of news stories covering these events; social justice students helped facilitate the monthly programs and wrote accompanying reviews for each. All of these materials were posted on the blog, where students responded to each other through structured online commentary.

The cross-collaborative community engagement project culminated in a campus-wide hunger banquet, a dinner and lecture event designed to foster awareness of global hunger. Together, all students provided materials featured at the hunger banquet. Journalism students created an audio-visual display of news stories, photographs, videos, and comments from the blog. The banquet also showcased art installations featuring food packaging to demonstrate the average Food Stamp budget and diet, created by the social justice students. Both classes also attended the banquet as guests, actively experiencing the results of their project.

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<sup>3</sup> Although we each visited the complementary course at the start of the term, classroom visits were limited to maintain the cross-collaborative dynamic between our courses. With contact information exchanged between courses, students were given the opportunity to engage both instructors as needed. Further, both instructors attended all project-related events and specifically engaged with the other group of students to check in on their progress and engagement in the project.

## **Project Evaluation: Assessing the Cross-Collaborative Community Engaged Approach**

This project set out to explore the ways that a collaborative teaching approach could enhance the experience of bringing community engagement to two separate undergraduate courses. Specifically, our cross-collaborative community engagement approach allowed us to bring “the best of both worlds” to our teaching, and create opportunities for practical skill application and experiences outside of our classrooms.

An important principle of community engaged learning is the provision of structured opportunities for purposeful reflection on student service experiences. Reflective writing and evaluative rubrics provide space for students to process, validate, and articulate what they learned and how they learned (Jenkins & Sheehy, 2012, Assessment/Reflection section, para. 1). To this end, students composed structured, reflective essays to process their experiences with the cross-collaborative community engaged project, including the selected topic of food justice, participation in project activities, and collaborations with fellow students, instructors, and community partners. At semester’s end, we also conducted an evaluation of the project by gathering and reviewing course materials, our teaching notes, formal course evaluations collected by the university, and students’ project reflections.

We agreed that the collaborative approach to organizing the service project was successful from our point of view as instructors. Cross-collaborative community engagement allowed us to create a shared-yet-distinct collaborative experience, avoiding some pitfalls of typical approaches to collaborative teaching and community engagement. In addition, students also found the cross-collaborative community engagement project an insightful and successful venture. These materials indicate a positive experience that provided students with pragmatic knowledge and application. Our evaluation also indicated challenges to initiating and sustaining collaboration with students across individual courses.

### ***The Best of Both Worlds***

Evaluation materials reveal that both instructors and students appreciated the “best of both worlds” outcome fostered by the cross-collaborative approach. A clear benefit was the opportunity to draw on one another’s expertise and resources in distinct areas related to facilitating the service project; we kept in constant contact to answer questions, share resources, as well as answer student queries. For example, Krakow’s teaching notes mention early in the semester that she found it useful “to direct journalism students to [Hunt] when they had complex questions about food justice policies or needed to get ahold of a community partner that was difficult to reach.” Hunt’s teaching notes also recount this instance with a sense of relief: “[R]ealizing that [student] was in need of a community contact for her story, I was glad to be able to easily connect her to the campus gardening group through my contacts there.” This evidences our shared feeling that executing such a large-scale community engagement project individually would have been more difficult without the expertise each instructor provided. Thus, sharing the workload for project organization and implementation was a distinct benefit of the cross-collaborative approach.

The unique nature of our collaboration – two instructors leading autonomous courses on separate topics – allowed us to work together while avoiding the pitfalls of traditional team teaching. Because we each maintained singular instruction of our own class, we did not have to manage the in-class negotiations that occur between collaborating instructors including day-to-day lesson planning and time management (Bettencourt & Weldon, 2010). Indeed, Hunt indicates her positive feelings about the shared-yet-distinct collaboration in her teaching notes, “Students told me today they appreciate interacting with the Journalism class on the blog... but I find it essential that our class also has time to work on our own aspects of the project, like planning the art installation for the hunger banquet.” Because each class continued to meet separately, each instructor was able to maintain autonomy over her course’s materials, teach respective content, and achieve individual course objectives.

### ***The Benefits of Practical Applications***

Our approach offered students opportunities to develop practical skills they are likely to encounter in the workplace, and to demonstrate these skills in the fields of journalism and social justice advocacy. We agreed to structure each course to mimic the activities of applied settings to invite students envision themselves as real participants in the promotion and reporting of food justice issues. Our teaching notes indicate that we each found this structure beneficial for organizing class activities and motivating student participation. This was particularly appreciated by journalism students, as Krakow wrote: “They are really working together to divide up responsibilities and produce the best stories for their assigned beats...seeing their work published on the blog, with comments, helps them envision themselves as true practicing journalists.”

Students also reflected on the benefits of the applied settings. One social justice student noted that “trying to figure out how to best communicate information forces you to take a detailed look about how people acquire messages generally, and how these different methods drastically change the end result.” Throughout the semester, students learned more about methods and motivations for engaging in advocacy/activism, and learning by doing “what it takes” to get particular service-related tasks done. A student broadly summed up his enthusiasm for the applied classroom approach: “[T]he actual kinetic practice of working through food justice can be so much more effective than simply talking about social justice theories.” Several expressed excitement about the opportunity to work on tasks “outside of my comfort zone” as well as to “push myself farther and realize that I can do more than I thought possible.”

Given the shared-yet-distinct structure created by the cross-collaboration, the blog was an essential tool for maintaining communication across the two courses. Krakow noted, “I’m impressed with the quality of the comments on the blog. I think that my students are holding themselves to higher standards when they know the other class is responding to their work.” Students also reiterated the practicality of the blog as a teaching tool. As one social justice student reflected, “The class blog was a great communal way of exchanging ideas and reflecting on class events. It provided a good forum to talk directly with other students about advocacy techniques.”

### ***Challenges to the Cross-Collaborative Community Engagement Approach***

Both instructors and students generally felt that the cross-collaborative community-engagement venture was successful in mitigating many of the issues related to more traditional collaborative teaching approaches (Harris & Harvey, 2000; Mahoney & Brown, 2013; Plank, 2011). Yet it was not without limitations, as our teaching notes and student feedback indicate some unanticipated drawbacks of this initial experience. As noted, purposeful reflection is an important element in the facilitation of community engagement projects (Jenkins & Sheehy, 2012, Assessment/Reflection section, para. 1), for co-teachers, reflective activities not only allow for assessment of the collaborative learning process, but also contributes to professional learning and the refinement of one's teaching practice (Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012). With this in mind, the unexpected challenges we experienced are included here not to dissuade others from pursuing a cross-collaborative approach, but rather demonstrate the importance of honest reflection for continued modification.

Although we each appreciated the autonomy we had in maintaining separate courses, we could not fully escape feeling obligated to the other instructor as the service project unfolded. For example, after the second lunch-and-learn event, Hunt needed extra time to prepare social justice students for writing and uploading their editorial comments to the blog, yet she felt uncomfortable asking Krakow to change the deadline: "...I had to ask [Krakow] to let her students know that they cannot expect to see my students' comments on the blog until next week. I hate to make them all wait" Further, Krakow felt pressured to have journalism students work quickly to post polished items to the blog for social justice students to comment on: "If we did not have a second class working with us on the blog, I could slow the pace down to give my students a little more time on their photo project." Thus, although we were able to avoid issues of competition and anxiety often associated with the traditional collaborative teaching environment (Bettencourt & Weldon, 2010; Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Shibley, 2006), we were still accountable to one another simply by creating a collaborative relationship between our courses.

Students also expressed some concern with community engagement. For example, although there was no added tuition fee associated with either course involved in this project, those who had not anticipated the extra work required in a community-engaged context became irritated: "If I were to improve one thing, it would be having a notice in the course description or an email ahead of the semester letting students know that there is a service learning component to this course. I think that this would also help with people being more dedicated to the projects and the work that we did." Further, a small but distinctive subgroup of students conveyed disappointment with not being able to be more involved in the selection of the course issue: "...it would have been a lot more fun for me if I was able to choose a cause to advocate for and get a group of people together in class to advocate and serve." In our post-project reflections, we agreed that having students who wished to seek out other social justice topics of interest to them is a worthwhile problem though the success of cross-collaborative community engagement rests on classes connecting on a shared socially relevant project.

Despite these limitations, our evaluation of the project as a whole suggests that cross-collaboration can be an effective strategy for bringing community engagement into separate classrooms. Importantly, both of these challenges are common, and perhaps to some degree unavoidable, in a collaborative community engagement context. In light of these unexpected issues, we suggest instructors anticipate hurdles in the planning process, creating an accommodating atmosphere between all collaborative partners (including both courses, as well as any service/community partners involved), and building flexibility into the service project (i.e. timeline, assignments, and deliverables).

## **Best Practices for Cross-Collaborative Community Engagement**

Community engagement is an innovative and exciting approach to implementing applied learning, particularly across different kinds of courses. Ultimately, for students and instructors alike, our initial experience with a cross-collaborative community engagement approach was a success. Bringing community engaged learning into the classroom can be a daunting task requiring substantial time and coordination above and beyond regular teaching and research expectations. This study offers one strategy for successfully introducing community engagement through collaboration with another instructor, enriching the teaching, learning, and community experiences for all involved.

For higher education instructors who may find the work required to plan and implement traditional modes of collaboration “daunting” (Day & Hurrell, 2012, p. 6), cross-collaborative community engagement can be a more manageable approach. We suggest several best practices for utilizing this modality. First, faculty are encouraged to seek out others teaching complementary courses that may be within one’s department, in another program, or perhaps at another institution. Instructors should engage in exploratory “teacher talk” (Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012), and be open to share pedagogical values, knowledge, and expertise. Keeping each course’s learning objectives in mind, brainstorm possibilities for the community engagement project with consideration of the resources and networks available through each instructor. Planning is key (Jenkins & Sheehy, 2012), and instructors should work together to set a project timeline, schedule appropriate assignments, and share information between classes; for us, the blog served as the portal for communication and presentation of project deliverables. Finally, this approach is marked by its shared-yet-distinct structure, it is therefore essential that instructors regularly check-in throughout the cross-collaborative process, making adjustments as needed, as well as evaluate and reflect at the project’s conclusion.

Instructors of higher education should continue to report the successes and challenges of implementing such an approach. In particular, more research is needed to develop and assess strategies for implementing community-engaged projects in interdisciplinary settings. Working with a fellow instructor, either within one’s department, one’s college, or perhaps at another institution can offer additional support and ongoing resources in navigating the waters of community-engaged projects. As institutions of higher education continue emphasize career development, applied skill sets, and community involvement, this case study offers one strategy to make community-engagement an accessible and successful undertaking.

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